

## **Pop Goes The Question by Nqllisi**

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## Pop Goes The Question

Tales of Realism, True Love, and the Shortcomings of the United States' Healthcare System

1)

Max had wandered away from the other kids at the Wheeler's late-summer barbecue and was staring out at the sunset. Lucas walked over and took her hand.

"It's pretty here," Max said quietly.

"Yeah," Lucas agreed. He swallowed audibly. "Maybe...uh, maybe we could get married and live in this neighborhood someday."

Max looked at Lucas and smiled. "I really like you, you know that? But I don't want to live in Hawkins when I grow up. And...people don't usually marry their junior high girlfriends." She pressed a kiss against his lips to take any sting out of her words.

"Yeah, I know," he said softly.

2)

"For Pete's sake, Joyce, you have to go to the doctor." Jim Hopper ran his hand through his hair in frustration. He was leaning against the counter in the Byers' kitchen, helping Joyce fix dinner for the troop of teens scattered around the house. Joyce was nearly doubled over, coughing.

"I can't afford it, Hop," she said weakly. She coughed again. "If I'm not better after I get paid Friday, then I'll go."

"Friday? It's Tuesday. You could have pneumonia by then. And by the time you even get your check Friday, it'll be too late and the clinic will be closed for the weekend. Come on, I'll pay for the visit. You sound awful."

"I *feel* awful. But I'm not going to let you pay for me. I'm fine." She moved toward the doorway. "Tacos are ready!" she called out, her

voice hoarse.

The Chief rolled his eyes. "You are not fine. I wish you'd let me take care of you."

Despite her pallor, Joyce's eyes flashed. "I am a grown woman. I do not need anybody to take care of me," she snapped.

Hopper held up his hand in surrender. "You know what I mean," he sighed. "I just hate to see you feeling so bad. I want to help." He walked toward her and brushed her hair away from her face. They looked at each other for a moment.

Breaking eye contact, Hopper leaned down the hallway. "Dinner is ready, folks!" he called out.

Joyce eased herself into a chair at the dining room table. "You do help, Hop. You fixed my sink, you pick up Will from baseball when I'm working, you just helped make dinner..." she trailed off, coughing some more.

"Well, it's only fair. You feed my kid at least twice a week." They both chuckled. Joyce's house had become the de facto second home of the Party, since everybody there knew everything that had happened with Will and El and Hawkins Lab.

Hopper sat down at the table beside Joyce and looked out of the window. He took a deep breath and said, "You know, I have really good insurance."

Joyce shot him an annoyed look between coughs. "Good for you."

"No, I—I mean, the city offers good benefits."

"What, are you hiring?"

"No, I—I'm saying that if we got married, I could add you and Will to my insurance." He was still not making eye contact, and his voice sounded a little higher than normal.

Joyce froze. After a silent moment, she leaned forward in her chair. "What?"

"Um, yeah, I'm just saying- you would be covered for stuff like this cough, and, you know, you're cooking for both of us all the time anyway, and I could be here to help fix stuff, and..." He broke off and looked at her, pleadingly.

Joyce opened her mouth to say something, but started to cough again. She held up a finger to indicate that he needed to hold on. Once she was done, she said, "Are you saying we should *get married* so it's more convenient for you to *fix my stuff*?" Her face was twisted in confusion and annoyance.

"No!" Hopper stood up from the table. He had made great strides in controlling his temper since he'd taken in his adopted daughter, but the edge of it was definitely present in his voice. "No, I'm saying we should get married because I love you. I'm just trying to convince you of all the reasons it makes sense to marry me, because I'm afraid you are going to say no!"

"Oh."

Hopper paced around the kitchen for a moment, finally stopping to lean against the counter, his back to Joyce at the table. There was a moment of tense silence, then-

"OK." Joyce spoke quietly, and then cleared her throat as though muffling yet another cough.

"What?" Hopper turned to look at her.

"I said, OK. I'll marry you, Hop."

Joyce and Hopper were both startled by the cheers and applause that erupted from the hallway. Will, Mike, El, Max, Lucas, and Dustin stood in a clump, where they'd stopped on their way in to dinner to hear the conversation.

"Gee, thanks," Hop grumbled at their audience, blushing and grinning. He stepped toward Joyce and held out his hand, pulling her up from her chair and taking her in his arms. He went in for a kiss, but she pushed him away and started coughing again. "Yeah, right. Time for that later," he said, and joined the kids for tacos.

3)

"So, I talked to your dad today."

"I know. He's not happy about your new job." Mike and El were sitting on a picnic blanket in the woods. It was chilly, but this had been their favorite spot for many years now. They always came back here to remember the time and place they'd first met.

"Right. Well, I didn't really expect him to like it. To be honest, I'm pretty nervous about it, too." Mike had accepted a job at the newly-reopened Hawkins Lab. He was hoping to use his new position to find out what had really happened to Eleven, to Will Byers, and to the other kids who had been held and experimented on at the facility. The job, starting in just two days, had been his goal for all of his years of advanced schooling. Now that it was a reality, the thought made his stomach hurt.

"I know." El smiled at him. "But it will be OK. We'll be there together, right?" To convince Dr. Owens to reopen the lab and let Mike work there, they had offered to let Owens study Eleven and her abilities.

"Together. Always." Mike puffed out a sigh. "But, uh, the job wasn't the only thing your Dad and I talked about."

"Oh?" The Chief had hinted that Mike had brought up more than just his new job at Hawkins Labs, but had declined to give details. "What else, then?"

Mike looked away and bit his lip before looking back into her eyes. "I told him I was tired of waiting, and that I was going to marry you."

El's big eyes opened impossibly wide and her mouth opened slightly.

"What, are you surprised?"

"I—I guess not. But we've never really talked about it."

"I figured you knew. I mean, that getting married was always part of the plan for me. You always seem to know what I'm thinking." He made a face of mock alarm. "Wait, mind reading isn't actually one of your powers, is it?"

She shook her head, smiling.

"That's a relief. Anyway, you're right. We haven't really talked about this. And it occurred to me after I talked to your dad that I should have asked you first. I'm sorry about that."

"It's OK. It's just...wow."

"I hope that's a good 'wow.' This next part will be really awkward if it isn't." Mike reached into the picnic basket and pulled out a tiny box. He popped it open. The small diamond ring sparkled in the autumn afternoon light. "Um. Jane Hopper—*El*—will you marry me? Please?"

Already a young woman of few words, El was too overcome with emotion to speak. She nodded, tears in her eyes, and leaned in to kiss her new fiancé.

*A/N - part of the same "Stranger Things" universe I've started in the story "Longer"*